

Forty Years of the European Society for Dermatological Research as European Dermatology Goes from Strength to Strength

“There’s strength in numbers” is an oft-quoted phrase that is relevant to the state of dermatological research in Europe. This dictum is central to scientific investigation, not only as evidenced by greater statistical confidence resulting from larger subject groups, whether in clinical trials or in basic research, but also in the long-held tradition of scientific collaborations. More numbers translates to more skills, more diversity, and (commonly) better output. Strength in numbers also applies to the dissemination of research results; for the most part, this means presenting one’s data to sufficiently large audiences, which are more likely to include high-caliber scientists and key opinion leaders. Among the obvious advantages of appropriate dissemination is a greater likelihood that the results will impact science and society, either immediately or through the generation of hypotheses for subsequent research. Another number, whose strength is important not only to researchers but also to journal editors, is the impact factor of the journals in which results are published. This number may influence research funding allocation—both directly (by government) and indirectly (by success of grant applications)—and is a simple yardstick by which researchers and editors are judged. However, best science and its dissemination is an interactive and iterative process, and it has long been appreciated that bringing scientists closer together in a physical, as well as intellectual, sense stands to strengthen their respective disciplines.

Much of this may seem obvious to today’s readers, especially given the ubiquity of technological advances such as teleconferences, social networking sites, and numerous online journals, both within and outside our specialty, and the frequent availability of conferences on

subjects ranging from immunology to aesthetic plastic surgery. Nevertheless, the possibilities that exist today are not simply the result of our own endeavors, but more often are also due to the fact that each successive generation reaches higher by standing on the shoulders of its immediate predecessors. One former possibility that became a reality is the European Society for Dermatological Research (ESDR), which celebrates an important milestone this year as it hosts its 40th annual meeting, to be held in Helsinki, Finland, 8–11 September 2010. The foresight of a group of clinical academic dermatologists and dermatological scientists in the late 1960s and early 1970s allows us to celebrate a maturational process, which, per the dictum that “life begins at forty,” takes us to the next phase of the ESDR’s development. In the 1960s, before the founding of the Society, there were many national dermatological organizations that had been in existence in Europe for some time, but their annual meetings were generally held in native languages and there was no unifying association or society that readily brought together these various groups of dermatologists on a regular basis (for more details on the founding of the ESDR, see <http://www.esdr.org>). Across the Atlantic, the Society for Investigative Dermatology (SID) had been founded in 1938, and it must have been with envy that European dermatologists looked on as members of the SID gathered annually at conferences that brought together like-minded scientists and inspirational dermatologists.

Yet, in the modern world, where audit, governance, and appraisal are familiar to every dermatologist, it seems sensible to ask “What has the ESDR actually achieved?” Scientific training teaches us to be objective, so how can we evaluate the ESDR’s achievements in an objective way? One approach would be to look at the size of the annual ESDR meeting in terms of numbers of presentations. During the

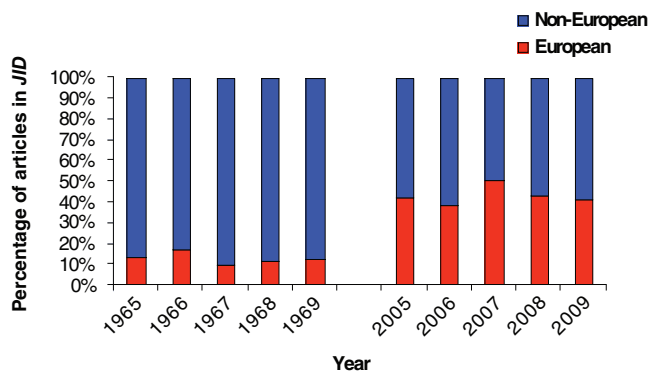


Figure 1. Proportion of articles published in the *Journal of Investigative Dermatology* during the years 1965–1969 and 2005–2009, inclusive, from European and non-European research groups.

first annual meeting, 31 presentations were given, whereas in the years 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2009, the number of abstracts was 457, 522, 684, 575, and 615, respectively. In 2008 the International Investigative Dermatology (IID) meeting (comprising the annual meetings of the ESDR, the SID, and the Japanese Society for Investigative Dermatology (JSID)), held in Kyoto, included 1,353 presentations, with approximately equal numbers coming from Europe, North America, and Asia (Abstracts, 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; 2009; Abstracts of the IID Meeting, 2008). Thus, we can see evidence that the results of investigational dermatology in Europe were being disseminated, via the ESDR annual meeting, to a greater extent than in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Even allowing for the fact that the population of Europe was 656 million in 1970 and is currently estimated to be 732 million (Population Division, 2008), the overall proportional increase in presentations at ESDR meetings between the early and more recent years is greater than what would be expected. However, a cynic might conclude that these numbers say more about the friendly and inviting atmosphere of the meeting and the beauty of the countries in which the recent conferences were held (Austria, Germany, France, Switzerland, and Hungary) than about the high-caliber science presented. A more objective view can be obtained from the proportion of publications in the *Journal of Investigative Dermatology* coming from European groups in the latter halves of the 1960s and the 2000s (i.e., 1965–1969 and 2005–2009, respectively). Admittedly, the total number of articles published in *JID* was approximately double in the late 2000s compared with the late 1960s, but the relative proportion of manuscripts from Europe has increased from a mean of 13.2% to 43.2% over the intervening period (Figure 1). The strengthening of European dermatological research clearly parallels the maturation of the ESDR. Although the ESDR cannot claim full credit for this, it is notable that many current and past members of the ESDR have published and continue to publish in *JID* as well as in other high-ranking scientific journals; thus, it seems likely that the ESDR has had a positive influence in this sphere. The

impact factor of the *JID* has also risen, from 1.690 in 1975 (the first impact factor for the *JID* appeared in 1975) to 3.735 in 1986, 4.645 in 2001, and most recently 5.543 in 2009. European authors (including ESDR members) must take some of the credit for this, notwithstanding the credit that is also due to our colleagues in the SID and JSID as well as to the journal's editors themselves.

The ESDR fostered dermatological research and enhanced clinical dermatology in other ways as well. In 1971 its membership was 85, whereas it is now more than 900, with an average of over 1,000 delegates having attended ESDR meetings in recent years. These attendees come from 30 countries across Europe but also include researchers from countries across the globe (e.g., the United States, Canada, the Republic of China, Japan, Korea, and Australia). Simply by bringing people together, the ESDR has played a part in the development of interactions and collaborations among its members, such as the formation of the GENESKIN project, which is run by a consortium of clinical and research centers from 12 European countries and is funded as part of the European Framework 6 Programme (<http://www.geneskin.eu>). The ESDR has also played a key role in founding the European Skin Research Foundation (ESRF) (<http://www.euroskinresearch.org>), akin to the Dermatology Foundation in the United States, which was launched in 2007 as part of a partnership involving the European Academy of Dermatology and Venereology, the European Dermatology Forum, and the René Touraine Foundation; the ESRF awarded its first new investigator awards as early as two years later, in 2009. Farther afield, the ESDR has developed and continues to strengthen interactions with its sister societies, the SID and the JSID, as evidenced by the attendance of significant numbers of members from these societies at the ESDR annual meetings, and vice versa, and by the highly successful five-yearly IID conferences, the next of which will be held in Edinburgh in 2013.

The success of the ESDR, epitomized by its annual meeting and the publications by its members, is based on the recognition that top-quality science must be nurtured and disseminated widely, irrespective of whether the experimental approach is molecular, genetic, or epidemiological, as well as on an appreciation that conferences should be enjoyable and held in locations that encourage participation by younger and older delegates alike. The numbers speak for themselves in terms of membership, presentations at the annual meeting, publications, and collaborations. On the basis of these data, European dermatology looks strong indeed. Yet, the ESDR cannot afford to sit on its laurels; rather, it must encourage more active participation and the development of high-quality dermatological research throughout Europe, particularly in areas where it is less advanced and/or where there is less involvement of dermatologists and dermatological scientists in its pursuit. It is therefore fortunate that the strength of the ESDR's foundations fostered dermatological research and built strength on top of strength. Evoking the Celtic myth in which people do not age in Tír na nÓg (the

land of eternal youth), the birthday wish as the ESDR turns 40 is that we will continue to mature but never grow old.

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